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Some Characteristics of the Mountain Chickadee.

BY C. BARLOW, SANTA CLARA, CAL.

IT was a cheery *chick-a-dee-dee* that gave me my first introduction to this vivacious bird in the Sierra, and when I later discovered a nest hidden securely in an old pine stub deep in the forest, I could not resist the impression that here indeed was contentment personified. Here, far from the habitations of man, and beside an abandoned trail which had long since ceased to re-echo human footsteps had settled a pair of Mountain Chickadees (*Parus gambeli*). No matter how fared their neighbors and with no time to gossip with the shy warblers of their domain, these little birds seemed unconscious of all else save their piney mansion.

True they were not fastidious and had taken up house-keeping in old quarters, and their particular stub with its deep-creased bark and rotten foundation did not differ from a thousand other stubs which dotted the forest. But this stump, capped by the previous winter's snow, was destined to become the arena of intense activity with the advent of Spring.

It has seemed to me that many of the characters of every-day life have their counterparts in the bird world. Some of the feathered tribe show great deliberation in their work, as though spring would never wane; others, such as the Wood Pewee and flycatchers find much

time to watch the doings of their neighbors, but the chickadee is the ideal of industry. I have never seen a Mountain Chickadee that he was not deeply engrossed in his work, his *chick-a-dee-dee chick-a-dee-dee* sounding shrilly the warning that no one must delay him.

This black-and-white Parus occurs from the lower ridges of the Sierra up to the summit, and deserted indeed are the woods that do not re-echo his call. Like most of the resident species using protected nests, the Mountain Chickadee begins nest-building early, being but little influenced by the elements. Rotten stubs have the preference as nesting sites, particularly where the core of the tree has rotted away, leaving a cavity. I doubt if the birds attempt much excavating, aside from carrying out loose material. Of all the nests I have examined a majority were in pine or spruce stubs with the entrance at the top.

My first nest was found on June 11, 1898, as Mr. L. E. Taylor and I were walking along the stage road. I shot a bird which was moving about in the timber and found it to be a Mountain Chickadee. Fearful of results I looked about for a possible nest. An old spruce stub about three feet high and nine inches through stood near the road and a two-inch hole in its top led down into the darkness. On scraping

the stub a series of hisses came forth denoting young.

We tore open one side of the stub and beheld a nest of nine young chickadees ready to fly. They scrambled up

young birds were counterparts of the adults. The male bird was calling near by so we patched up the stub and continued on our way. On the following day I found the young had all left



Photo by C. Barlow.
NESTING STUB OF THE MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE.
(With section removed.)

the side of the rough wall and three escaped into the brush; while the other six were quieted and a photograph of the stub was made. In plumage the

the nest and the loss of the mother bird had not proven so tragic as the reader may have been led to imagine.

An examination of the nest showed

that the core of the stub had rotted out to a depth of twelve inches. The entrance was perhaps two inches in diameter, but the nesting cavity had evidently been enlarged. At the bottom about two inches of soft, stripped spruce bark had been placed for a foundation and on this rested two inches of fine, soft, matted fur, much of which had been gathered from some luckless squirrel. This made an extremely warm and downy nest for the young, and the labor of bringing such a mass of material into the stub is worth contemplating. The illustration shows very well the nest after one side had been removed, although but one of the six young chickadees secured a "full length" portrait.

On June 8, 1899, Mr. H. W. Carriger found a nest of this species in a pine stub four feet up, holding seven newly-hatched young. The nest was of shredded cedar bark and squirrel fur. This nest was located in the deep pine-woods.

When we camped on a beautiful mountain meadow at 7,500 feet in June, 1900, the Mountain Chickadee did not desert us. The meadow was damp, and frosty nights were the rule, yet almost the first bird that greeted us on our first morning in the meadow was little *Parus* in a tamarack near the cabin. Presently he flew down to the base-boards of the cabin and peered inquiringly into a rough hole which some woodpecker had probably drilled in previous years. Then he was off and a peep into the hole disclosed the female bird setting complacently on an exquisite nest and eight eggs.

The domestic affairs of this pair of birds would no doubt have proven productive of many interesting observations and photographs had we been permitted to tarry, but such an arrangement was out of the question. So I concluded that the set was my lawful prey because I was ordinarily some 200 miles from the Sierra, while to the chickadees the matter of producing a

second set was one of small moment and the additional practice of nest-building would be beneficial, tho' I doubt if they ever again build quite so unique a nest as was this one.

The nest had been built on a joist under the cabin in a space ten inches long and seven and a half inches wide. This had been filled with cow-hair, squirrel fur and hemp picked up from about the dairy, and when the nest was removed it presented a solid mat $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick and of the dimensions given. Near the center of the mat a round cavity $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches across and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep held the eight eggs. Of these one was spotted, one had a trace of markings while the other six were pure white. The set was but slightly incubated when collected on June 10, 1900. During our stay on the meadow Mr. Atkinson found a nest just finished in a tamarack stub, but no eggs had been deposited. During May of the same year Mr. Taylor found a nest located in a rotten cavity of a large tree trunk by the roadside near Fyffe.

On June 6, of the present year while at Fyffe Mr. Taylor and I noticed a Mountain Chickadee enter a deserted woodpecker's hole in a large burnt stump eight feet from the ground. Upon opening the nest eight fully-grown young chickadees flew out one by one while both parents anxiously watched the proceeding from a nearby bush. On June 10 at Slippery Ford we found another nest in a black-oak snag on a hillside. The stump was about six feet high and a hole in the top served as an entrance to the nest. As in all previous cases the parent bird in the nest gave vent to a series of hisses which might easily have been taken for those of a snake had we not known the contents of the cavity. This nest held small young but we could not determine the size of the brood.

The above nesting records cover perhaps the range of nesting-sites selected by this chickadee and the sets of eggs vary apparently from seven to nine,

occasional specimens being spotted lightly. I must also mention that the Mountain Chickadee is possessed of a soft and very musical song, although it does not seem to be uttered nearly so frequently as the common-place *chick-a-dee-dee*. This song consists of four notes, two being given in the same high key while the last two drop perhaps half way down the scale. To my notion it is very similar to the song of the Golden-crowned Sparrow, but judging from the recent discussion of the latter's song in this journal, I fear that many Californians will have to observe *Zonotrichia coronata* closely before they can appreciate my comparison of songs.



Alma's Thrush in Colorado.

MR. HARRY C. OBERHOLSER in the *Auk* Oct. 1898 describes this new thrush and says: Montana, Colorado and Texas have both *swainsoni* and *almae* during migration. He gives lists of specimens from Colorado as follows; Clear Creek, Twin Lakes, Denver and Colorado Springs. I collected a male May 20th, 1900. It was in company with several others in a clump of cottonwoods along a small branch of the Poudre River inside the city limits of Fort Collins. The day was cloudy with a fine drizzling rain that had set in the night before making everything dripping wet but that did not dampen their spirits as they were singing as only a thrush can sing. They were very shy keeping among the leaves in the topmost branches, and it was with difficulty I secured one. Dr. A. K. Fisher kindly identified it for me.

Prof. Cooke's list and first appendix to same were published before Mr. Oberholser described it, but in his second appendix published May 1900, by some oversight he omitted it.

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Eggs From American Barn Owls in Captivity.

AT THE Northern Division meeting in Alameda May 7, 1898 a paper entitled "The American Barn Owl in Captivity" by myself was read, describing a brood of downy owlets recently taken, and their habits in confinement. As a sequel I will furnish a few other notes concerning the later life of the three survivors. After their plumage was well formed I decided that the box in which they were raised was too small for them, so fenced off a space under a pigeon house, whose floor was six feet from the ground. A shed and fence on two sides of the cage, which was about ten feet square, shut out considerable light. The floor was dry and sandy and two nail kegs were nailed up close to the roof and slanted downward toward the bottom.

Then I had considerable difficulty in transferring the owlets into a sack. They fought viciously at my gloved hand with beaks and talons. If they had been handled daily from infancy I doubt if their wildness or ferocity could have been overcome, except to that certain degree which is influenced by hunger and habit of forced observation on the attendant's movements. When first liberated in this enclosure they flopped about wildly, hissing in evident terror, and finally flopped into one of the nail kegs. After this they were not intruded upon for some days but always made a physical commotion, beating about the cage, at my entrance.

During the day they remained quiet but at dusk began their hisses. This hiss of voluntary origin was unlike the hiss caused by their defensive attitude, both in sound and intervals of frequency. A pail of water was set into the enclosure but I could not determine that they had much use for it either as a beverage or an ablution.

No live rodents were ever served with their menu, because there were very few about the yard at this time,